

GOD'S GRAND IMPROVISATION
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 24
Matthew 6:25-34

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it."
Psalm 24:1 (NRSV)

"Consider the lilies . . ."
Matthew 6:28 (NRSV)

The universe started in an extremely simple way.
Following the big bang it was just an expanding
ball of energy. Now, after 13.7 billion years,
it is rich and complex,
the home of saints and scientists.
This fact in itself might suggest that something
significant has been going on in cosmic
history. . . . It would be far too intellectually
lazy just to say it was all a happy accident.

John Polkinghorne and Nicholas Beale
Questions of Truth: God, Science, and Belief

*Startle us, O God, with beauty all around us:
blue sky and bright sun, moon and stars,
green grass and bright flowers.
Startle us with the beauty of our children,
our friends, our beloveds.
Startle us with your presence in the world,
in people around us and in our own hearts.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

"Consider the lilies," Jesus said one day, and I have been doing that recently. I have a lifelong hobby of kneeling with my hands in the dirt. It goes all the way back to the dreaded responsibility of helping my father weed his garden, which I found profoundly distasteful but now strangely satisfying and which has evolved, amazingly, into planting something, growing something, everywhere we have lived. The Chicago Avenue Community Garden is enormously helpful in this regard: tomatoes, lettuce,

herbs, begonias, impatiens, iris have traveled with me from that garden I hated to weed in western Pennsylvania to the Garth of Fourth Presbyterian Church, with sojourns along the way in Indiana and Ohio. Recently I have discovered lilies, day lilies, not just the orange variety that will grow anywhere, but lilies with fancy names like Champagne and New Orleans Belle and that produce truly stunning blossoms in bright rich colors: brilliant yellow, burnt orange, deep red. They startle me every time I see them, particularly in the morning, and I do, in fact, think about Jesus one day saying to his disciples “Consider the lilies—they neither toil nor spin . . . yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” The point he was making was that God’s providence and loving care was a reality in all of life—witness the birds of the air and the beauty of the lilies—so they, his friends, had nothing ultimately to fear and could relax and enjoy themselves. God’s creative love was with them, and so they could live freely, giving their lives away.

It is called creation theology, and its premise is that you can see and know the creator by looking at the creation. Christian theology hastens to add that while that is true, there is more to God than creation shows; there is more goodness and grace and love, which we see in Jesus. But seeing God in creation is an early and important part of our religious tradition.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God,” the psalmist wrote (Psalm 19), “and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” Mary Oliver is a favorite of mine. She writes poems about the world of nature and the God who created it and is present and accessible to us in it:

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who made the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety—
best preacher that ever was,
 dear star . . .
 (“Why I Wake Early”)

“Best preacher that ever was”: the sun, a conveyer of the reality of God—now there’s a concept for the preacher to ponder.

The opening line of Psalm 24, the psalm for this Sunday, contains, Walter Brueggemann says, the most sweeping affirmation of creation theology in the entire Bible: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.”

Everything in the world has being because God intends it. Every living thing has breath and life because of God. Every inanimate part of creation *is* because God intends it: rivers and seas and mountains, sky and stars and moon and Mary Oliver's best preacher that ever was, the sun.

At the heart of both Judaism and Christianity is a deep and profound reverence for creation, gratitude for the created order, and a powerful responsibility for its well being.

Those of us who live in cities and spend most of our time in cities, which means most of us here this morning, are inclined to neglect, if not forget, that there is a lot of manufactured matter between us and the original matter God created. We live on concrete and blacktop mostly. We move and have our being in the midst of steel and glass, granite and plastic. We ride in automobiles, cabs, buses, elevated trains, and airplanes, on highways, rails, and runways. For our recreation we may walk or ride a bicycle beside our wonderful lake, but most people do not have that opportunity, and even when we do, it's still concrete and blacktop, and we encounter not so much the God of creation, as the cyclist on his twenty-one speed, high-tech Colnago Italian racing bike, wearing brightly colored racing attire, coming right at us at 40 m.p.h. Saturday afternoon on the lakefront is not so much an experience of God's love in the creation as it is an exercise in survival. We forget that underneath the concrete is the earth, dirt, and sand and mud and water, and it is there so powerfully and profoundly—the force of life, God's energy and love—that green, growing things somehow find a way to push up all the way through between cracks in the sidewalk or even on the traffic island in the middle of Michigan Avenue.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in a new book entitled *An Altar in the World*, says, "How had I forgotten that the whole world is the House of God? Who had persuaded me that God preferred four walls and a roof to wide-open spaces?" (p. 41).

Francis of Assisi, born in 1182, whose "Canticle of Creation" is the basis for the beautiful hymn we sang this morning, is one of the most memorable proponents of creation theology. A privileged, spoiled young man, son of a prosperous cloth merchant, Francis volunteered to fight in a war with neighboring Perugia, wasn't very good at it, was captured, spent a year in prison, where he contracted malaria. Upon his release, he was sick and depressed, wandered into a church in disrepair one day, San Damiano, where there was an ancient, beautiful crucifix hanging over the altar. Francis heard a voice: "Rebuild my church." He literally rebuilt San Damiano, and then he decided to rebuild the church by reminding people that God is also available in the world around them. So he stepped outside the four walls of the institutional church, walking on the streets of the towns and the dusty roads of Umbria in a brown peasant tunic, trying

simply to live like Jesus, owning nothing but the clothes on his back, befriending everyone, even the animals, condemning no one, treating all with the respect he believed was in them because they were part of God's good creation. His example was compelling in an age that identified religion with privilege and military power. Followers began to gather: men and women, in a separate order led by Clare. Pretty soon there were many Franciscans. Francis became very influential. During the Fifth Crusade he traveled to Egypt to visit the court of al-Malik al Kamil, nephew of the great Saladin. He told the Muslim leader about Jesus, and Malik was so impressed with Francis's courage and simple integrity that he invited him to stay for a week to continue the conversation.

Then Francis traveled to the Crusader encampment and met with Cardinal Pelagio, the pope's leader of the Crusade, to try to persuade him to make peace with Saladin, whose army was bigger and better than the Crusaders'. Francis's peacemaking efforts failed and so, ultimately, did the Crusades. Thomas Cahill, in *Mysteries of the Middle Ages*, tells this story and speculates how different history might have been had Francis and the Muslim leader reached an accord.

When he returned to Assisi, Francis was sick, frail, and blind, and his body was covered with sores—maybe a form of leprosy. Francis was dying, but one of the last things he did was write a remarkable poem, "Canticle of Creation." It is the first poem written in Italian and the basis of all subsequent Italian literature. But it's the theology that is striking:

Most high, omnipotent, great Lord . . .
Praise be to you, my Lord,
with all your creatures,
especially Brother Sun,
who illuminates the day for us.
Praise be to you, my Lord,
for Sister Moon . . .
for Brother Wind . . .
Sister Water . . .
Brother Fire . . .
Praise be to you, my Lord,
for our sister, Mother Earth,
who nourishes and sustains us all
and brings forth diverse fruits
with many-colored flowers and herbs.

(see Thomas Cahill, *The Mysteries of the Middle Ages*, pp. 157–171)

What a lover Francis was: a lover of his fellow human beings. What a lover of the world and everything in it. What a lover of God. It was all of a piece for him.

One of the most intriguing things that is happening in our day is the lively and relatively new conversation between science and religion, and one of its effects is to refocus theology on the creation. Just last week the president nominated a distinguished geneticist, Francis Collins, as Director of the National Institutes of Health. Collins led the Human Genome Project, which unraveled the mystery of DNA, and sees evidence of God as he observes the hidden mysteries of the natural world. Collins, a believer, author of the best-seller *The Language of God*, not only does not think there is a conflict between science and religion but believes that each enriches the other.

Another scientist on the cutting edge who happens also to be a person of faith is John Polkinghorne, who has authored, with Nicholas Beale, *Questions of Truth: God, Science, and the Bible*. He is a very distinguished mathematical physicist, formerly President of Queens College, Cambridge, and an Anglican priest and first-rate theologian. Polkinghorne says, "The Bible is not a divinely dictated textbook. . . . It is much more like a laboratory notebook recording the events of divine self-disclosure" (p. 9).

Polkinghorne sees the hand of the creator not only in the rational order of the universe, but also its beauty. "A frequent and rewarding scientific experience is that of wonder at the beautiful patterns of order—order and beauty too remarkable to be treated as a happy accident. Belief in God makes it all intelligible" (p. 12).

Discussing the fine-tuning of the universe to make life possible, Polkinghorne describes how it comes about: "The only place in the universe where carbon is made is in the nuclear furnaces of the stars. Every atom of carbon in our bodies was once inside a star—we are literally people of stardust. . . . If the laws of nuclear physics had been even a little bit different, there would have been no carbon and thus no you and me." His conclusion is theological: "Many more examples of this fine-tuning have been identified. What are we to make of this? It would be far too intellectually lazy to say it was all a happy accident. So remarkable a fact surely calls for an adequate explanation" (pp. 13-14).

Polkinghorne believes and says that the explanation that makes the most sense is God. I love the way he put it in musical terms: "The history of the universe is not the performance of a fixed score, written by God in eternity and inexorably performed by creatures, but it is a grand improvisation in which creation and creatures cooperate in the unfolding of the grand fugue of creation" (p. 7).

God's Grand Improvisation—what a great concept.

Our theological and ecclesiastical ancestors, the Celts of Britain and Ireland, understood creation theology, and it often put them in conflict with Rome. In the Western Highlands of Scotland, especially on the Hebrides Islands off the west coast, there developed a Christian spirituality that lived close to the earth and creation. Perhaps because of the Druidic tradition that preceded it, Celtic Christian spirituality focused on the earth and sea, the fertility of creation. Perhaps its best and most visible symbol is the high standing crosses, which still dot the landscape in Western Scotland, the islands, Ireland—fifteen, twenty feet high, constructed outdoors, not inside churches, to stand beneath the sky in wind and rain and sun and snow, dramatic symbols of the connectedness of heaven and earth. There are several of these high crosses on the island of Iona, where a man from Ireland, Columba, landed in the fifth century and started a monastery from which missionaries went out to Scotland and northern Europe. There is on Iona today a restored ancient abbey church; a conference center; a community with members from all over the world who are devoted to liturgical renewal, peace and justice, and Celtic spirituality; and several of those magnificent high standing crosses from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Iona, it is said, is a “thin place,” where there isn’t much of a divide between the sacred and secular, heaven and earth. To stand beneath one of those great high crosses, with a radiant sun at the center and the interlacing carving all along the beams, and to think about the 1,000 years it has stood under the sky and all the people over those 1,000 years who have stood beneath it, singing, chanting, praying, is, I have found, a fine and mystical experience.

I am reminded of our Celtic heritage, maybe the best of it, every time I am privileged to hold an infant in my arms for the sacrament of baptism. It is an ancient Celtic tradition that to look into the face of a newborn child is to see the image of God. I love a Celtic invocation of blessing : “The lovely likeness of the Lord is in thy pure face” (see J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, p. 49).

The other side to understanding that “the earth is the Lord’s” is to understand our culpability in messing it up, in polluting the water and air, in greenhouse gases and global warming. That is an entire topic itself, but it deserves mention here, even if only briefly. The earth is the Lord’s. We are not the owners. We are here for a few decades and then hand it over to our children. Someone said, “We don’t own the earth. We borrow it from our children.” And the truth is we are handing to our children a much dirtier, polluted, and endangered world than our parents handed to us. The good news is that our government has finally acknowledged that there is a problem, that we—with 4 percent of the world’s people contributing 25 percent of the world’s greenhouse gases to the atmosphere—are a big part of the problem. And that we need to lead the nations of the world in reversing the lethal process of environmental degradation. So turn out the

lights; walk, don't drive, to the store; eat locally and grass-fed; stop eating tomatoes in January, because it costs more in fossil fuel to get them here from South America and, as everyone knows, they don't taste like tomatoes. Do it and much more: write your senators and representatives, not simply because you are an environmentalist, but because the earth is the Lord's.

Wendell Berry, a poet and farmer who lives close to the earth, wrote recently,

When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake at night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be—I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty in the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things . . . into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free.
(*Context*, June 2009 personal correspondence)

"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." God loves the world—loves it enough to create it, nurture it, and then send a beloved Son into it, to take a human body and live in the beloved world, to walk its dusty roads, to eat and drink with beloved friends, to laugh and talk and weep; to love it so much he would die for it. It is a holy place, because God made it and because the Son of God lived in it and died for it and because one day, when he wanted his friends to know the very essence of it all—God, the world, their lives in the world, their struggles, challenges, suffering, their anxieties and fears, their dying—he said simply, "Consider the lilies."